

Out of Work and Full of Worry

Call for Renewed Federal Aid Not Likely to be Heard

By Imran Vittachi - Chicago Tribune

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Cecil Sells considers himself one of the "luckier" ones, even though he's been jobless since September, laid off from his \$50,000-a-year job as a pre-press operator in Carol Stream.

Others have had it tougher for a lot longer. In November, the long-term unemployed were out of work for an average of more than 20 weeks, the highest it has been since January 1984, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Sells, 45, of Sycamore, said he is not encouraged by the Bush administration's claims that the economy is improving.

"Maybe that's happening in some never-never land," said Sells. "But if I don't find a job by March, I may have to sell my house or find other measures to feed my family."

In March, his weekly state unemployment check of \$331, which goes toward supporting him and his wife and helps pay on his son's college loans, will run out.

Sells was among a small group of unemployed Illinois residents who joined leaders of anti-poverty organizations and Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), to call on the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress to renew federal benefits. A lifeline lasting 13 weeks, the benefits kick in after state support runs out, but the package is set to expire Sunday.

"The Grinch is back [this Christmas]," Schakowsky said at the Friday press conference, which was sponsored by the local chapter of the AFL-CIO at a church in the Loop.

She said President Bush, together with House Speaker Dennis Hastert and their fellow Republicans, were now "toasting each other for this supposed economic recovery."

"They're ignoring the 8.7 million unemployed workers and those who are about to lose their benefits," Schakowsky said.

Last Christmas, Bush extended benefits into the new year. But this time that appears unlikely; Congress has adjourned for the holidays.

"There seems to be more resistance from the Republican Congress than last year," said Ross Eisenbrey, vice president of the Economic Policy Center, a Washington think tank. "Without presidential intervention, this time Congress won't renew it."

Despite encouraging reports from the Department of Labor that the national economy may be pulling out of its morass, and that the nationwide unemployment rate is finally dipping, the outlook for recovery in Illinois isn't so bright.

While nationwide unemployment fell in November to 5.9 percent, it stood at 6.7 percent in Illinois. In some pockets Downstate, the rate ranges between 7 percent and 10 percent, said Margaret Blackshere, head of the Chicago AFL-CIO.

Eisenbrey and others say this is no time to terminate the benefits, known as Temporary Extended Unemployment Compensation. November's long-term unemployment rate eclipsed the average of 15.4 weeks set in March 2002, when the benefits took hold.

"The notion that the economy is turning around and that this is no longer needed is just wrong," said Eisenbrey. He pointed to long-term unemployment indicators, which in November were higher than in March 2002, when the federal benefits were introduced. "It should at least be extended for another six months."

The White House, and the offices of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), did not respond Friday to requests for comment.